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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet provides a definition of learning disability (LD) in adults; a list of common elements found in many useful LD definitions; and a list of areas in which LD may affect life situations of adults. The background of the concept of "learning disability" is briefly reviewed, followed by the definition of the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, which was selected for use by the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center because it reflects current information and issues associated with LD, allows for the presence of learning disabilities at any age, and has wide acceptance in the LD community. Highlights of the definition are pointed out, as are common elements in a variety of LD definitions. Definitions adopted by the U.S. Office of Education in 1977, the Learning Disabilities Association of America, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, and the Rehabilitation Services Administration are also provided. Finally, a brief discussion identifies areas in which LD impacts adults, including self esteem, education, vocation, social interactions, and independent living. (DB)

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National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center
A Program of the National Institute for Literacy

Adults with Learning Disabilities

Definitions and Issues

It has been estimated that 50-80% of the students in Adult Basic Education and literacy programs are affected by learning disabilities (LD). Unfortunately, there has been little research on adults who have learning disabilities, leaving literacy practitioners with limited information on the unique manifestations of learning disabilities in adults.

One of the major goals of the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center (National ALLD Center) is to raise awareness among literacy practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and adult learners about the nature of learning disabilities and their impact on the provision of literacy services. This fact sheet provides: a definition of learning disabilities in adults; a list of common elements found in many useful LD definitions; and a list of areas in which LD may affect life situations of adults.

BACKGROUND

In 1963, the term "learning disability" was used to describe such disorders as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. In 1975 the passage of regulations accompanying Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, specifically included a definition of learning disabilities **for children** that served as a guideline to provide appropriate educational, legislative, and judicial relief. The federal definition was based on the needs of children with learning disabilities, not recognizing how their disability would affect them as adults.

It became apparent that learning disabilities persist throughout an individual's life, and it became crucial to develop a definition that describes LD but did not limit the condition to children. Thus, professionals in education, psychology, neurology, biology, and child development have developed definitions that describe learning disabilities as a **lifelong** condition.

DEFINITION

Many useful definitions for LD have been accepted by educators, federal agencies, advocacy groups, and/or professional organizations. After reviewing several of these definitions, the National ALLD Center Advisory Board selected the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities' definition of learning disabilities for use by the National ALLD Center. Advisory Board members selected this definition because it reflects current information and issues associated with LD, allows for the presence of learning disabilities at any age, and has been accepted by a committee with broad representation in the LD community.

The Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities Definition

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system

dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socio-environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.

Definition Highlights

✓There are many variations of learning disabilities.

✓Learning disabilities may cause difficulties in any of the following skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and mathematics.

✓Social skills may be affected by the learning disability

✓Learning disabilities may be due to a central nervous system disorder.

✓Although a learning disability may be present with other disorders, these conditions are not the cause of the learning disability.

COMMON ELEMENTS IN LD DEFINITIONS

The following concepts are important to understanding the similarities and contrasts that exist among the many definitions of learning disabilities.

- Some definitions suggest that learning disabilities exist when a person has uneven patterns of development. Other definitions suggest that learning disabilities are indicated by aptitude-achievement discrepancies.

- Most definitions specify that the cause for learning disabilities is the result of a problem in the central nervous system.

- Some definitions suggest that learning disabilities are caused by interference in the neurological processes that make proficient performance possible.

- Most definitions imply that learning disabilities can be present at any age.

- Most definitions specify that problems understanding spoken or written language can be caused by learning disabilities.

- Some definitions specify that certain types of academic problems (e.g., those involving reading, writing, spelling, or math) can be caused by learning disabilities.

- Some definitions specify that problems involving social skills, spatial orientation, sensory integration, or motor skills can be manifestations of learning disabilities.

- Some definitions indicate that learning disabilities can coexist with other kinds of handicaps (e.g., emotional disturbance or sensory impairment). Other definitions are worded to eliminate the coexistence of learning disabilities with other disabling conditions.

IMPACTS OF LD IN ADULTS

The impacts of learning disabilities may compound with age. While individuals with learning disabilities have average or above aver-

Important Definitions of Learning Disabilities

The following definitions are important for several reasons. The United States Office of Education's definition is the basis for determining learning disabilities among school age children. The Learning Disabilities Association of America's definition reflects the views of one of the largest advocacy groups for learning disabilities (LD) in the country. The Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities' definition was acceptable to federal agencies on the committee, except for the US Department of Education. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities' more recent LD definition was acceptable to most advocacy and professional organizations. And finally, Rehabilitation Services Administration's definition is one of few attempts to formulate a definition that focuses on work.

The 1977 U.S. Office of Education

The term "specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning disabilities which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (United States Office of Education. (1977). Definition and criteria for defining students as learning disabled. *Federal Register*, 42:250, p. 65083. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.)

The Learning Disabilities Association of America

Specific Learning Disabilities is a chronic condition of presumed neurological origin which selectively interferes with the development, integration, and/or demonstration of verbal and/or nonverbal abilities. Specific Learning Disabilities exist as a distinct handicapping condition and varies in its manifestations and in degree of severity. Throughout life, the condition can affect self esteem, education, vocation, socialization, and/or daily living activities. (Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. (1986). ACLD Description: Specific Learning Disabilities. *ACLD Newsbriefs*, Sept./Oct.(166), 15. Note: The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities is now the Learning Disabilities Association of America.)

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The Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socioenvironmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities. (1987). *Learning disabilities: A report to the U.S. Congress.* Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health, p.222.)

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dsyfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences. (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. (1988). *Collective perspectives on issues affecting learning disabilities: Position papers and statements.* Austin, TX: PRO-ED.)

Rehabilitation Services Administration

A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the central nervous system processes involved in perceiving, understanding, and/or using concepts through verbal (spoken or written) language or nonverbal means. This disorder manifests itself with a deficit in one or more of the following areas: attention, reasoning, processing, memory, communication, reading, writing, spelling, calculation, coordination, social competence, and emotional maturity. (Rehabilitation Services Administration. (1985, January 24). *Program policy directive.* Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services.)

age intelligence, they may not excel as adults in certain life situations at the same level as their peers. Areas where learning disabilities may affect adults include:

- **Self Esteem** - Being criticized, put down, teased, or rejected because of failures in academic, vocational, or social endeavors often leaves adults with learning disabilities with low self-esteem. Adults with low self-esteem tend not to take risks or strive to reach their potential. Also, adults with low self-esteem are less likely to advocate for themselves.

- **Education** - Learning disabilities that may manifest themselves in difficulties in spoken or written language, arithmetic, reasoning, and organizational skills will affect adults in postsecondary educational and vocational training settings. These students may perform at levels other than those expected of them. Adult educators are not always prepared to address the unique needs of learners with learning disabilities.

- **Vocation** - Errors are commonly found in filling out employment applications because of poor reading or spelling skills. Job-related problems frequently arise due to learning disabilities that causes difficulties in organization, planning, scheduling, monitoring, language comprehension and expression, social skills, and inattention.

- **Social Interactions** - Adults with learning disabilities may demonstrate poor judgement of others' moods and attitudes and appear to be less sensitive to others' thoughts and feelings. In social settings these adults may do or say inappropriate things and have problems comprehending humor, for example. They may have problems discriminating response requirements in social situations. These traits may result in a difficulty finding and keeping a job or developing long term relationships.

- **Independent Living** - Responsibilities such as writing checks, filling out tax forms, or taking phone messages may present problems for adults with learning disabilities. Adults with LD may find themselves without the support systems (parents, schools, social services, etc.) that they relied on as children and have to incorporate their own accommodations when necessary.

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